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ABSTRACT

A model is presented for constructing and evaluating an effective alumni volunteer program to aid in the student recruitment effort. A review of successful programs reveals certain common features and provides important touchstones for other schools looking for the principles and practices with which to organize their own efforts. The first section outlines the goals of alumni recruitment programs and suggests methods for attracting volunteers. This is followed by a description of a formal recruitment program, including the tasks assigned to volunteers. The final portion presents several ways to evaluate the success of these programs. Appended are graphs showing what proportions of rejected, accepted, and enrolled applicants are recruited by traditional methods and by alumni. A list of references is included. (Author/MSE)

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A MODEL FOR ALUMNI PARTICIPATION IN STUDENT RECRUITMENT

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THE ASSOCIATION FOR INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

This paper was presented at the Twentieth Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research held at the Peachtree Plaza Hotel in Atlanta, Georgia, April 27 - May 1, 1980. This paper was reviewed by the AIR Forum Publications Committee and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC Collection of Forum papers.

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(Editor, AIR Forum Publications)

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a model for constructing and evaluating an effective alumni volunteer program to aid the student recruitment effort. A review of successful programs reveals certain common features and provides important touchstones for other schools looking for the principles and practices with which to organize their own efforts. The first section outlines the goals of alumni recruitment programs and suggests methods for attracting volunteers. This is followed by a description of a formal recruitment program, including the tasks assigned to volunteers. The final portion of the paper presents several ways to evaluate the success of these programs.

The idea that universities will need an aggressive recruitment effort if they are to survive the demographic conditions of the 80's has become so commonplace as to make restatement almost superfluous. The population of 18 year-olds, who constitute 75% of first-time college freshmen, peaked at 4,292,000 in 1979 and will decrease 20% by 1990 and more thereafter (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1977, pp. 37-52). Universities dependent upon tuition revenues to pay a substantial proportion of essentially fixed costs simply cannot continue to operate with greatly decreased enrollments. At the same time as the need for aggressive recruitment increases, so does the expense of maintaining the admissions program. Some private colleges currently spend well over $1,000 to matriculate one student (Ihlanfeldt 1975, p. 22). Obvious, then, is the desire to increase the recruitment effort while stabilizing costs. One way to effectuate such a plan is through the use of alumni as recruiters.

The acceptability of alumni in recruitment is a relatively new idea. As William Ihlanfeldt has observed, admissions officers have, historically, opposed involvement by alumni in the recruitment process for a variety of reasons -- overzealousness, a lack of propriety or expertise among graduates, or a fear that the recruitment effort would slip away from professional control (Ihlanfeldt 1980, p. 136). Recently, however, arguments that alumni proud of their alma mater could provide a positive image of and a sense of identity with the university in hundreds of communities that can be reached only on a one-day visit, if at all, by an admissions counselor, have spurred a

reassessment of the role which alumni can play in attracting students to campus. An indication that universities are accepting and, indeed, seeking alumni participation in recruitment is evidenced by the fact that the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) has sponsored two workshops on student recruitment during this current academic year, and both emphasized development of alumni programs. Successful ones have been established at Boston University, Brown, Carnegie-Mellon, Indiana University, Northwestern, the University of Pennsylvania, and the University of Redlands; these have served as important touchstones for other schools looking for the principles and practices with which to organize their own efforts.

Central to the development of an alumni recruitment program is a clear statement of its goals. For most universities there will be three: to increase the pool of qualified applicants, to increase the number of accepted applicants who actually enroll, and to insure continued enthusiasm of current alumni by providing a means by which they may contribute meaningfully to the university. Although most alumni recruitment efforts are too new to have generated reliable data on the correlation between participation and giving, administrators of alumni recruitment programs agree that alumni who identify with their alma maters tend to become donors, and there is evidence that participation in an alumni recruitment effort <u>does</u> foster an alum's identification with the university.

Alumni may be involved in a formal recruitment effort or they may provide information which will enable the admissions

office to increase the pool of inquiries. At Adelphi University in Garden City, New York, the first step in organizing the alumni recruitment program was formulation of a questionnaire sent to the entire alumni body. On the basis of response to three questions, alumni and their families were identified as potential applicants to the university. Alumni were asked for the names and ages of their children and, if children were of high-school age, their expected date of graduation. Alumni were also queried about their plans for further study in both degree programs and continuing education courses. Children of alumni will receive a brochure on university programs accompanied by a personal letter from the Admissions Office. Alumni who express an interest in graduate programs and continuing education courses offered by the university will also receive appropriate information.

The alumni questionnaire also asked persons willing to volunteer for a formal recruitment program to identify themselves. Several other methods of obtaining volunteers have proven effective as well. Stephens College in Columbia, Missouri reported success with a letter outlining the program, which was sent to graduates from the Classes of 1948 through 1974 who lived in selected states. They were asked to return an enclosed card if they wished to participate. In addition, any alumna who submitted the name of a prospective applicant to Admissions was invited to participate in the program (Harris, 1979, pp. 76-77). Both Northwestern and the University of Redlands emphasized the importance of involving alumni who are secondary school teachers. At the inception of its program, Redlands ordered a printout of

and sent letters to these and community college educators. Persons who responded formed the initial nucleus of the program (Bonney, 1979, p. 73). Other obvious methods of securing volunteers are through alumni publications which provide a tear-out coupon for response and through the institution's existing alumni groups -- whether these be regional organizations, special interest chapters, or a broad-based general alumni association.

Opinions differ on who make the best volunteers. Some universities accept all who seek to participate. Others suggest that alumni who have been out of school for about ten years and are, usually, less mobile than recent graduates, constitute the best candidates. In general, personality seems to be more important than age. Volunteers who have positive feelings about the institution and who can provide encouragement and enthusiasm for the prospective student, without resorting to either the hard-sell or the substitute parent role, seem to be most effective.

Once the volunteers have been identified, they must be organized for maximum effectiveness. Most alumni recruitment programs are set up on a geographical basis, with a regional committee structure in areas where there are a sufficient number of alumni. Otherwise, individual alumni communicate directly with the admissions office. When a school draws most or all of its students from its immediate environs, volunteers are normally grouped by careers and/or degrees, so that a prospective student has the opportunity not only to find out about programs from someone who is, presumably, familiar with them but also to establish contact with a potential role model. Age and similarity of

experience may be a factor when volunteers are recruiting non-traditional students. Adelphi University has established an Adult Baccalaureate Learning Experience (ABLE) program, directed to adult learners, current average age 39. Alumni of the program refer prospective applicants to Admissions, attend open houses, and supplement the professional counseling staff in providing informational interviews for applicants to the program. Their success is attributed, in large measure, to the fact that they are contemporaries of applicants and veterans of the same anxieties about a return to the classroom.

In order to function effectively, alumni volunteers must receive appropriate training. First, they must be given a clear indication of their responsibilities. Many institutions use alumni to identify prospective students. The University of Pennsylvania provides tear-out coupons in a variety of alumni publications so that alumni may submit names of family members, friends, or neighbors who might be encouraged to apply. Alumni may be asked to scan their local community newspapers and send to the admissions office articles on outstanding students. Some alumni recruitment programs demand that volunteers submit a quota of names each year, though such a procedure is, in general, not recommended. Volunteers may be asked to participate in one or more of the following activities that involve direct communication with individual potential students: contacting students whom the university has targeted, through such services as the Educational Opportunity Service Program of the American College Testing Corporation or the Student Search Service of the

College Entrance Examination Board, as desirable applicants; contacting students who have indicated an interest in the university and encouraging them to become applicants; and, following action by the admissions office on applications, contacting accepted students and encouraging them to matriculate. Several other kinds of assistance involving group rather than individual contact may also be requested: attending regional or on-campus open houses; representing the university at College Nights or College Fairs; hosting regional gatherings to acquaint applicants with the university; talking to parents of potential students; and providing a liaison between the admissions office and guidance counselors in their community's secondary schools and/or community colleges.

Before an alumnus becomes involved in any of these activities, he must attend a training workshop on the campus or in his community. Here he should meet with a member of the professional admissions staff, who outlines the responsibilities which the alum will be asked to accept, indicates procedures to be followed in carrying them out, and provides information about the university which the volunteer will need. Many institutions have found that a loose-leaf binder, subject-keyed, and regularly updated, makes the most practical handbook. The following should be included: admissions requirements and a timetable of admissions activities; a summary of educational costs and financial aid; a description of programs offered and of campus life, including dormitory arrangements and social, cultural, and athletic activities. A list of prominent alumni and distinguished

faculty as well as a short synopsis of the most innovative, distinctive accomplishments of the institution will also be helpful, not only to show the prospective student that the university counts for something, but also to enforce the alum's pride in his alma mater. While the initial information packet is crucial, little can be accomplished without giving the volunteer a sense of the on-going activities of the university in general and the operations of the admissions office in particular. Volunteers should receive copies of the campus newspaper and/or university newsletter on a regular basis; a personal letter from the admissions office should go out at least twice a year, once in the fall, when application processing begins, and again in the spring, when a profile of the accepted freshman class can be presented.

Alumni volunteering to contact students directly are asked to select several zip codes in their area and are then matched with student inquiries from these areas (Bonney, 1979, p. 73; personal conversation - Hedburg). Initial contact is usually by telephone, which has been judged more successful than letters. When alumni are asked to help increase the applicant pool by contacting students who have requested literature from the university, they can simply leave their name and phone number, offer to answer questions, and ask if further information would be helpful. Experience at several universities has shown that the percentage of inquirers who become applicants increases when personal contact is made. Calls to students who have already applied should again emphasize the alum's willingness to be helpful, should encourage students to submit credentials

before admissions deadlines, and, in cases where the university has identified an applicant as one whom it particularly wishes to encourage, stimulate and maintain the student's interest. Where volunteers have established close contact with an applicant or in cases where the applicant is the child or other relative of an alum, the volunteer should receive notification of the action taken by the admissions office on the candidate's application. If there are enough accepted applicants in a region, the alum can host a gathering to which both applicants and parents are invited.

Keeping alumni interest in the program requires both proper motivation and reward. Alumni will respond most generously if they are made to feel that their efforts are needed and effective. The admissions office must inform volunteers about the numbers of students accepted and matriculated whose presence can be attributed to alumni influence. Highly selective universities report that a major emphasis in their programs is providing careful explanation to the volunteer should it be necessary to reject an applicant whom he has recommended. Alumni who have served the program well should receive recognition of their efforts through publicity notices in newspapers in their home communities as well as in the university's own publications. A dinner or other social event will provide volunteers with the opportunity to share experiences and goals for the future.

A word should be said about the administration of the

alumni recruitment effort. While some universities have originated and continue to maintain their programs through the office of alumni relations, the consensus is that the admissions staff is best equipped to provide coordination and supervision.

As the admissions office is the locus for administration of the alumni recruitment program, so should the office of institutional research be charged with evaluating its effectiveness.

Recruiting is becoming the primary concern of many institutions, with no indication that this priority will change during the coming decade. Yet there is little published research concerning the effectiveness of alumni participation.

An overall look at the recruiting program will give the institutional researcher the facts on the number of applicants, the number rejected, the number accepted, and the number ultimately enrolled. The effect of alumni efforts within this overall picture can be determined by comparing the alumni-recruited students with all others.

A rough assessment of the impact of the alumni effort can be made by questioning enrolled freshmen and transfers about their reasons for coming to the institution. A university that has participated in the ACE/UCLA Cooperative Institutional Research Program, The American Freshman, can study changes in the reported influence alumni have on a freshman's decision to attend the institution. Non-participants in the ACE/UCLA program can develop questionnaires for freshmen and transfers to ask for this information.

In addition to the longitudinal study of inter-

institutional changes, annual comparisons of responses to questions in the freshman survey mentioned above should be made between institutions with well developed alumni recruitment programs and those with no programs. These comparisons, controlling for such factors as institutional reputation, age, size, and location, would indicate the effectiveness of the programs studied.

Comparing the percentage of accepted applicants who enroll after alumni contact with the percentage of a comparable group of accepted applicants who enroll without having alumni contact will give some indication of the effectiveness of the effort and of the specific kind of contact (phone, letter, reception). Thus the overall value of the program can be assessed, and the particular methods used can be compared for results. Decisions can then be made concerning the cost effectiveness of each method of contact.

Other questions to be investigated are whether those students who are recruited by alumni show higher retention rates than those who are not and whether relatives of alumni show higher retention rates than students who are not.

Figure 1 represents Hypothetical College with, say, 1,000 applicants, half of whom are rejected. Of those accepted, half enroll. If the professional admissions staff intensifies its efforts but does not alter its recruitment techniques, the likely result, as shown in Figure 2, is an increase that behaves in the same way as the original pool, i.e., 25% of the applicants enroll.

If, however, an increase is brought about by alumni,

who are dealing with smaller numbers of students, and searching selectively for outstanding students, the increase can be more productive. Because alumni concentrate on better students, they can improve the ratio of accepted to rejected students among those they recruit and, further, they can, increase the proportion of accepted students who enroll (Figure 3). From the point of view of the admissions office, this is efficient as well as effective recruiting: effective because it accomplishes the goal of recruiting a larger class and efficient because it costs the admissions office very little. One of the major financial advantages of using alumni is that they provide the manpower that would otherwise require paid staff plus all associated office and travel expenses. And beyond this, some institutions have discovered that alumni volunteers become more generous contributors, and in turn encourage others to give.

The development of a successful alumni recruitment effort requires a long term commitment, careful organization, and adequate financing. Institutions that have no organized alumni participation in recruitment would very likely receive two pieces of advice from those who have developed and run successful programs. First, start now. Second, move slowly. Start now because several years will be required to achieve a significant effect on enrollment. Start slowly because your alumni may get way ahead of you. Make sure you are staffed to give them all the information and help they need, or their enthusiasm will be quickly dampened. Look carefully at the institutions with successful programs: the Ivy League schools,

Indiana, Redlands, Northwestern, Stephens, and learn from them what seems to work and what doesn't.

Higher education in America is changing. As Costello (1979) has observed:

> American universities are learning slowly and, sometimes reluctantly, what every business organization has known since the beginning of time: survival requires a good product and effective marketing of that product. By and large our universities have always had a good product; but until recently they have expected the world to beat a path to their door. And, until lately, the American public has beaten a path to the campus. As the numbers of students increased, universities have multiplied. However, student numbers are no longer increasing; some colleges have had to close and the value of a college education has even come into question.

The redirection of resources for renewal necessary to meet the challenges of the eighties mandates that consideration be given to ways by which the university might more profitably utilize all of its resources. And what is more fitting than that alumni, those who represent the past of the university, be asked to help assure its future.

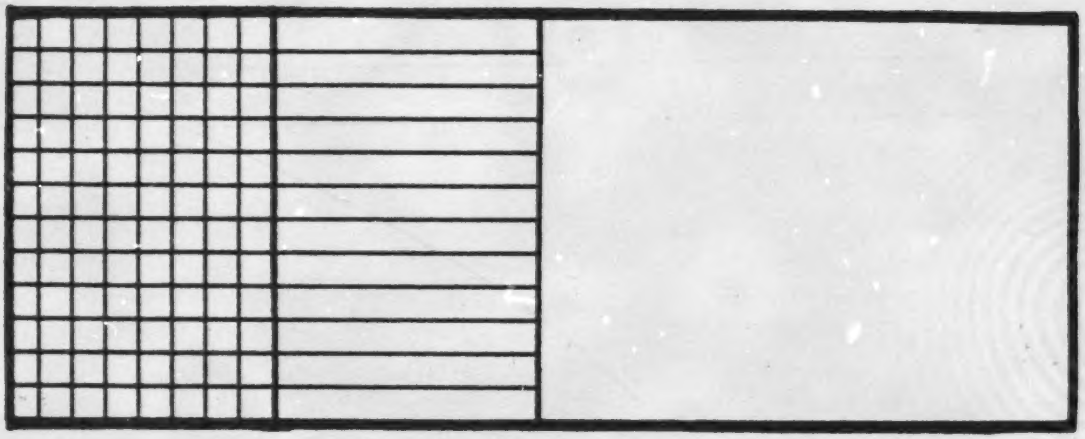


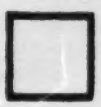
FIGURE 1. PROPORTIONS OF REJECTED, ACCEPTED, AND ENROLLED APPLICANTS

REJECTED

ACCEPTED

ENROLLED

FIGURE 2. PROPORTIONS OF REJECTED, ACCEPTED, AND ENROLLED APPLICANTS IN AN ENLARGED POOL RECRUITED BY THE SAME METHODS.



REJECTED

ACCEPTED

ENROLLED

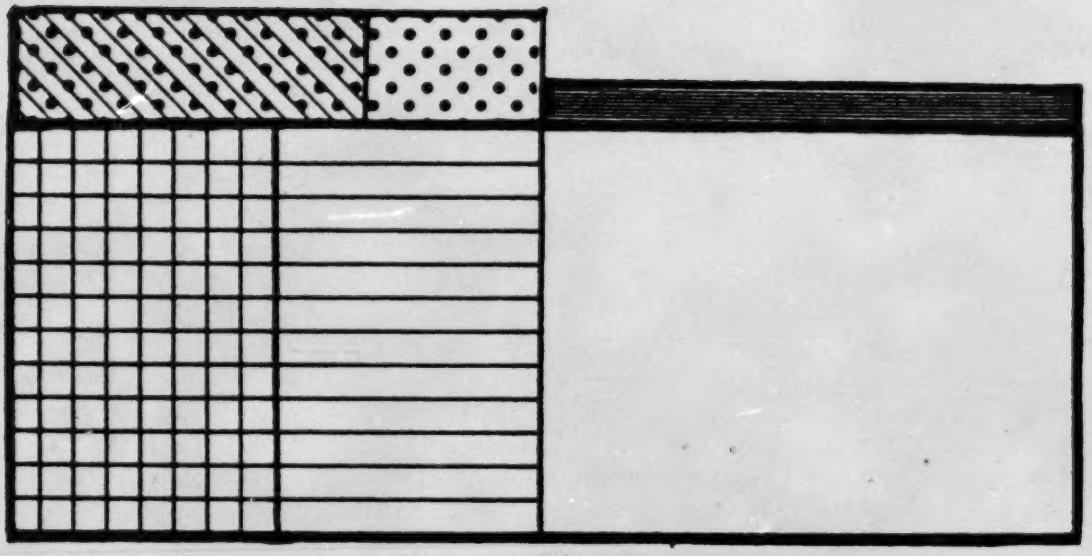


FIGURE 3. PROPORTIONS OF REJECTED, ACCEPTED, AND ENROLLED APPLICANTS RECRUITED BY TRADITIONAL METHODS AND BY ALUMNI

REJECTED

ACCEPTED

ENROLLED

REJECTED

ACCEPTED

ENROLLED

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